



# Cannabis Legalization



University  
of Victoria

Canadian Institute for  
Substance Use Research

## OPPORTUNITY FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

# Quick summary of cannabis regulations

The federal Cannabis Act defines which forms of cannabis are legal, how it may be sold and how much a person may possess. In BC, the Cannabis Control and Licensing Act and the Cannabis Distribution Act also apply. These laws, along with amendments to other legislation, create a legal context in BC in which:

## People under 19 years of age may not:

- consume, possess, produce, supply, sell, or (even attempt to) purchase cannabis or accessories unless authorized to possess medical cannabis
- enter or be inside a cannabis retail store or production facility
- participate in growing cannabis at home, or work in an environment associated with cannabis
- promote or advertise cannabis
- operate a vehicle (whether or not it is in motion) with cannabis in it, unless the cannabis belongs to an adult passenger, is from a federal producer and is still in unopened original packaging or is not readily accessible by the occupants

## Cannabis is sold in BC through:

- government operated Cannabis Stores and licensed private retailers (on-premise use of products not allowed)
- government operated online retail sales

## Adults over 19 years of age may:

- possess and share up to 30 grams of cannabis or equivalent in a public place, and up to 1,000 grams in a private place such as their home
- smoke or vape cannabis in most public spaces in which tobacco smoking is allowed
- grow up to four cannabis plants per household for personal use from seeds or seedlings from authorized suppliers and make legal cannabis-containing products (food/drink) at home
- purchase limited amounts of fresh/dried cannabis, cannabis oil, edibles, extracts, topicals, seeds or plants from authorized retailers

## In residences:

- landlords and strata councils can ban cultivation of cannabis plants
- pre-existing tenancy agreements that prohibit smoking tobacco are deemed to prohibit smoking cannabis, but not vaping or other forms of consumption
- cannabis may not be smoked or vaped in common areas of multi-unit buildings

## Adults may not:

- give, sell or promote cannabis or accessories to anyone under age 19
- allow a minor to consume in a place under their control or ask a minor to purchase cannabis for them
- smoke or vape cannabis in the workplace or use it on or beside school property
- use cannabis in any place where tobacco use is prohibited
- use cannabis in vehicles or operate one while impaired by cannabis
- take cannabis across international borders
- use a dangerous solvent (e.g., butane) to process cannabis
- operate a vehicle (whether or not it is in motion) with cannabis in it, unless the cannabis is from a federal producer and is still in unopened original packaging or is not readily accessible by the occupants

## Producers and processors must be federally licensed and follow strict regulations related to:

- packaging and labeling
- use of good production practices
- participation in seed-to-sale tracking
- restrictions on promotional activities

**For more information see [Get Cannabis Clarity](#)**

## Cannabis Legalization

### OPPORTUNITY FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Cannabis is now legal without prescription for adults in Canada. As a result, communities will face new challenges. But new opportunities will emerge as well.

This guide provides community leaders and organizations with a framework to:

- identify key issues and opportunities
- adopt a holistic approach to cannabis and well-being
- access information to make informed and thoughtful decisions
- address the needs of the whole community

The intent of this guide is not to tell communities what to do. It does not assume there are one-size-fits-all solutions to the issues communities may face related to cannabis legalization. Cannabis legalization is only one issue among many in a diverse community. This guide, therefore, promotes an inclusive approach to community engagement.

## Cannabis and life

Cannabis and other psychoactive substances have been used by humans for thousands of years. Today, as a result of legalization, adults who use cannabis are offered a safe, reliable supply produced and sold under strict regulation. People use cannabis for different purposes. This has significant implications. Now communities can openly discuss why people use cannabis and how they manage their use.

Cannabis legalization offers communities an opportunity to engage all stakeholders in meaningful dialogue. By listening to one another, people can come to understand cannabis better

and learn how to make informed decisions about its use. They can also develop social skills and learn how to get along with people who have different views and practices from their own.

We are all connected. Our choices shape and affect the choices and experiences of others, just as theirs shape and affect us. Part of what makes us human is our need to be our authentic selves within a larger group. We need both freedom and belonging. So, when living in a community, part of our responsibility involves recognizing differences. It also involves making choices that work for us while showing care for other people.

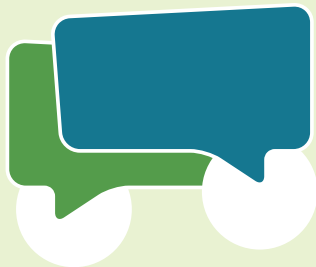
## Legalization

Cannabis legalization involves creating rules and restrictions. For example, there are rules limiting cannabis use to people age 19 years or older. There are also restrictions on use in certain settings or places. As with all rules, these will sometimes be broken for various reasons. These real-life situations in which the rules are broken can be used as gateways to bring people with diverse perspectives together, have a conversation, and build community understanding.

Having meaningful conversations before making rules is even better. The rules are then more likely to protect rights and respond to the needs of everyone. This includes those who see cannabis use as a social activity and those who wish to minimize their exposure to cannabis. Rules that receive broad buy-in and align with social norms are easier to maintain. Ideally, the outcome would be restrictions that build social bonding and respect, rather than foster scorn or shame around public cannabis use. This outcome would provide a foundation for inclusive policy and practice.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation in which two or more people seek to understand each other. While talking is a part of the conversation, listening and asking good questions are the more important skills. The goal is not to come away having convinced someone about something, but to have gained understanding of another's perspective.



Dialogue is a vital tool, especially as we enter the era of legalized cannabis. People have different perspectives on cannabis. We do not need to think and believe alike. However, we do need to live together. This requires that we understand each other and that we respect the needs, opinions and rights of others.

Open dialogue with all community stakeholders – leaders, business people, employed and underemployed people, parents, youth, Indigenous groups, police, health care and service providers – will help create a broader understanding of the views within our community. This understanding provides a critical foundation from which to develop shared approaches that respect everyone. Dialogue also helps participants develop the skills for the civil exchange of ideas that are so important in democratic communities. In dialogue, we discover new ideas that allow us to evolve our thinking and be lifelong learners.

For Dialogue resources see [Let's Talk Cannabis](#)

## Opportunities for communities

Cannabis legalization offers a number of rich growth and learning opportunities for the entire community. This new era can be ushered in with a strong commitment to a **healthy communities approach** featuring five building blocks:

1. community/citizen engagement
2. multi-sectoral collaboration
3. political commitment
4. healthy public policy
5. asset-based community development <sup>1</sup>

Below are some ways communities can embrace these building blocks and benefit from the changes taking place in society around cannabis.

### Nurture inclusive communities

Healthy communities are inclusive communities. An inclusive community ensures that citizen diversity is recognized and valued. It also fosters environments where everyone feels safe and welcome to participate in civic life.

The legalization of cannabis affects the entire community, not just those who use cannabis. People who want minimal exposure to cannabis are affected too. This is why it's so important to come together to work out ways to honour everyone's rights and needs, even if we would rather have things our way.

Some people in our communities use cannabis, while others use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. It is important to create and support environments where people who use drugs feel welcome too. Here's why: exclusion creates

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<sup>1</sup> Healthy Communities Movement, BC Healthy Communities, 2018.



conditions where riskier patterns of drug use can emerge. For example, people who feel shunned may isolate themselves and use drugs alone. Or they may use with people or in places that are not safe. Exclusion can lead to a cycle where people use drugs in increasingly riskier ways, leading to more exclusion and increased risk of harm.

Inviting all community members to discuss cannabis is one way to explore issues, learn about each other, and work together to build a community that is safe and supportive for all. Community leaders and citizens can support inclusive communities in various ways.

### Promote participatory democracy

Engaged citizens are healthier citizens. People who are engaged in their community develop broader social networks. This provides them with greater access to assets needed for resilience. They feel more positive about the community because they see it as *their* community. In turn, the community benefits from their broader involvement and assets (ideas, perspectives, knowledge, skills and resources). Engaged communities are healthier communities.

Cannabis legalization offers citizens an opportunity to build shared meaning around a controversial issue. Drug use and drug policy can be tough topics for communities. A variety of evidence,

### Think about ways to:

**Meet basic human needs:** When people have access to education, income, housing and social support, they are better able to participate in their community and contribute in meaningful ways.

Questions to consider:

- » How can we advocate for and promote access to adequate housing, income and supports for people with low income in our community?
- » How can local policy initiatives and land use decision-making processes promote access to housing, income and supports for those in need?
- » How can community assets such as land and buildings be leveraged to provide affordable housing and other necessities?

**Embrace diversity:** Our communities include seniors, adults, youth, children, Indigenous people, new Canadians, folks of all genders, sexual orientations, gender presentations, people of colour, people with disabilities, people experiencing mental health challenges, and people

with low-income. Each brings ways of being and experiences that add to the richness of a community.

Questions to consider:

- » How might the needs of a range of people be heard and addressed in the community?
- » How might diversity be represented in the cultural and recreational activities of the community?
- » How might cannabis rules and regulations adapt to a range of community attitudes and practices?

**Promote social connectedness and belonging:** When people are connected to their community and feel a sense of belonging, their physical and mental health improves.

Questions to consider:

- » What events and activities in the community bring a wide range of people together?
- » How might leisure opportunities and employment programs connect people to each other more effectively?

opinions and strong feelings may emerge that can be challenging to manage. The process can become overwhelming and confusing. People can begin to feel hopeless, detached or desperate for political leaders to “do something.” The fact is we make better decisions for our community when we listen to each other and work together. It is in our best interest to push through discomfort and ensure all citizens – cannabis users and non-users alike – have a say in matters that affect them.

## Review and update policies

Cannabis legalization provides an opportunity for communities to ensure they focus on ways to improve physical and social environments. It also encourages communities to expand access to local resources that enable people to support each other in achieving their full potential.<sup>2</sup> These improvements might involve reviewing a broad range of policy areas.

**Broad policy initiatives** that make no direct reference to cannabis at all may have a positive impact on factors related to cannabis use. These include policy initiatives that: provide more affordable housing, increase possibilities for viable employment, facilitate easier and broader access to community services, encourage greater involvement in educational settings and promote meaningful participation in community cultural and recreational activities.

In addressing these issues, community leaders and organizations will want to keep a focus on strengthening connectedness and promoting equity. This helps establish a climate that makes it more likely for people to stay connected, maintain mental wellness and use cannabis in less risky ways.

### Some things to think about:

- A community is healthiest when everyone is engaged in sharing ideas, perspectives, knowledge and skills. What processes and mechanisms encourage citizen engagement and sharing? How can these be improved and extended?
- In healthy communities, citizens are engaged in the processes that lead to value formation and decision-making. What does real citizen engagement in decision-making look like? How might we improve the sense of community ownership among citizens?
- Community dialogue invites citizens to understand different perspectives and encourages participation. How might we promote a range of opportunities for meaningful dialogue among citizens? How might we develop processes that encourage win-win rather than win-lose outcomes?

### Questions to consider:

- » How will the policy promote positive relationships and interactions among citizens? How will it encourage a sense of belonging in the community?
- » How will the policy reduce disparities or increase opportunities for people to thrive and flourish?

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<sup>2</sup> Healthy Settings, World Health Organization, 2018.

**Land use management and business regulation policies** are common concerns for communities and local governments. Under prohibition, cannabis production and processing was illegal and largely hidden. Now a new industry is developing openly. Cannabis retail facilities, both government-run and privately-operated, will be commonplace in many communities. Adults are allowed to cultivate up to four cannabis plants per household in and around their private dwellings, provided the plants are not visible from a public space and the home does not function as a licensed daycare facility. Even so, local governments, landlords and strata councils can impose restrictions or ban production altogether. Some of the concerns they are likely to consider include location, scale of operations, capacity of utility systems, impacts and safety.

Cannabis legalization provides an opportunity for communities to approach land use and business practice issues in much the same way they do other industries. Cannabis producers, processors and retailers need to be incorporated as socially responsible contributors to the community. Yet, cannabis is no ordinary commodity. As a psychoactive substance, it needs to be treated with care, respect and caution. How might local governments, strata councils, community organizations and citizens find balance while developing policies to regulate cannabis?

**Regulating cannabis consumption in public and shared spaces** is likely one of the most challenging areas of concern for local communities and community groups. The challenge is not really about cannabis so much as our collective responsibility to respect and accommodate each other.

In BC, smoking or vaping cannabis in public places is prohibited wherever tobacco smoking or vaping is already banned. It is permitted in most spaces in which tobacco smoking is allowed. This means smoking or vaping cannabis

### Questions to consider:

- » What concerns emerge when considering land for cannabis production or processing? How are these similar/different from other agricultural products? Why?
- » How are cannabis retail outlets similar/different than other stores? What can we learn from the ways we regulate the sale of alcohol and tobacco?
- » What specific aspects of cannabis use are relevant to property considerations or interpersonal interactions? How should these be managed in the community? On what basis would restrictions be justified?
- » How might cannabis production, processing, and distribution contribute to the health and well-being of the community? How might they compromise the health and well-being of the community? How can we optimize benefits and mitigate any potential harms?

is not allowed in virtually any public indoor space or outdoors in provincial, regional or municipal parks (except at designated campsites), at recreational facilities, on or near school property, on patios or transportation connecting areas. Adults have the right to use cannabis at home with some exceptions. Smoking or vaping is not permitted in common areas within shared housing complexes. Property owners have the right to ban smoking or vaping in tenancy agreements. Strata councils can restrict or ban cannabis smoking, vaping and growing. Strata corporations should seek legal advice around any restrictions they wish to impose.

Finding a balance that respects everyone's rights and promotes a spirit of neighbourliness sometimes means putting up with other people and their "stuff." We need to be patient and compassionate with those who are likely not purposely frustrating others, but simply trying to live their lives as they see fit. Sometimes the solution to conflicts with neighbours over cannabis use, or anything else, is simply to be more neighbourly – to reach out and get to know each other better. But when those around us do things we cannot live with, we need to speak up respectfully to share our concerns and reach some agreement. Some of those agreements get embedded in rules and regulations to guide the behaviour of all citizens.

#### Questions to consider:

- » How can we nurture mutual respect for rights and needs, differing sensibilities and sensitivities? How can we best cultivate a climate of civility, courtesy and caring?
- » When/where is cannabis use socially unacceptable? Why?
- » What kind of rules will best promote neighbourliness while protecting the rights of all?
- » What might be some ways to promote neighbourliness while protecting everyone's rights?

**Workplace policy related to cannabis** is an opportunity for local governments and community organizations to lead by example. Local governments and community sector organizations are large employers in many areas. They can set community norms and standards by developing model policies that ensure workplace safety, promote employee well-being and demonstrate respect for everyone's rights and needs.

Cannabis legalization offers local governments and community groups a platform for demonstrating inclusive engagement that recognizes and celebrates diversity in the policy development process. The process is likely to involve: dealing appropriately with impairment concerns (including legitimate disclosure and testing requirements), providing proper accommodations for medical use and disability-related use, and offering guidance around referral to support services.

#### Questions to consider:

- » How well do our policies accommodate and integrate employer and employee needs?
- » To what degree do we provide a safe and productive workplace?
- » To what degree do we have an environment that increases employee capacity to feel healthy and good about themselves?

#### For further information and support on cannabis policy:

- [Local Governments' Role in Licensing](#)
- [Municipal Guide to Cannabis Legalization](#)
- [Cannabis Retail Store License Handbook](#)



# Understanding why people use cannabis

Before legalization, it was difficult to talk openly about cannabis. This led to myths that persist today. For example, some of us still believe that using cannabis leads to laziness and lack of productivity. Yet many people who use cannabis have full-time jobs and busy households. Others insist cannabis use causes young people to drop out of school. But most often there are deeper reasons for quitting school. Cannabis use is more likely a way to avoid thinking about those reasons.

Cannabis is like any other commonly used drug in our society. Whether it is alcohol, tobacco, painkillers or even caffeine, **the degree to which drug use helps or harms us depends on many factors.** These include our personality, relationships, environment and health status.

Our reasons for choosing to use drugs are important too (see diagram at right). People who use drugs to feel good, explore or have fun with friends tend to do so in moderation. Compared to frequent drug use, moderate drug use is associated with lower risk of harm to ourselves or others. Using drugs to feel better or improve ourselves can be a little different. While people use drugs for a variety of reasons, regular or frequent use increases the risk of harm. In certain cases, though, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Most of us are familiar with the harms of using cannabis. For example, cannabis use can affect our short-term memory. This can be a problem before an exam, meeting or presentation. However, for people struggling with PTSD or other challenging experiences, temporary memory loss from cannabis use may be beneficial. Likewise, heavy, long-term cannabis use can cause lung

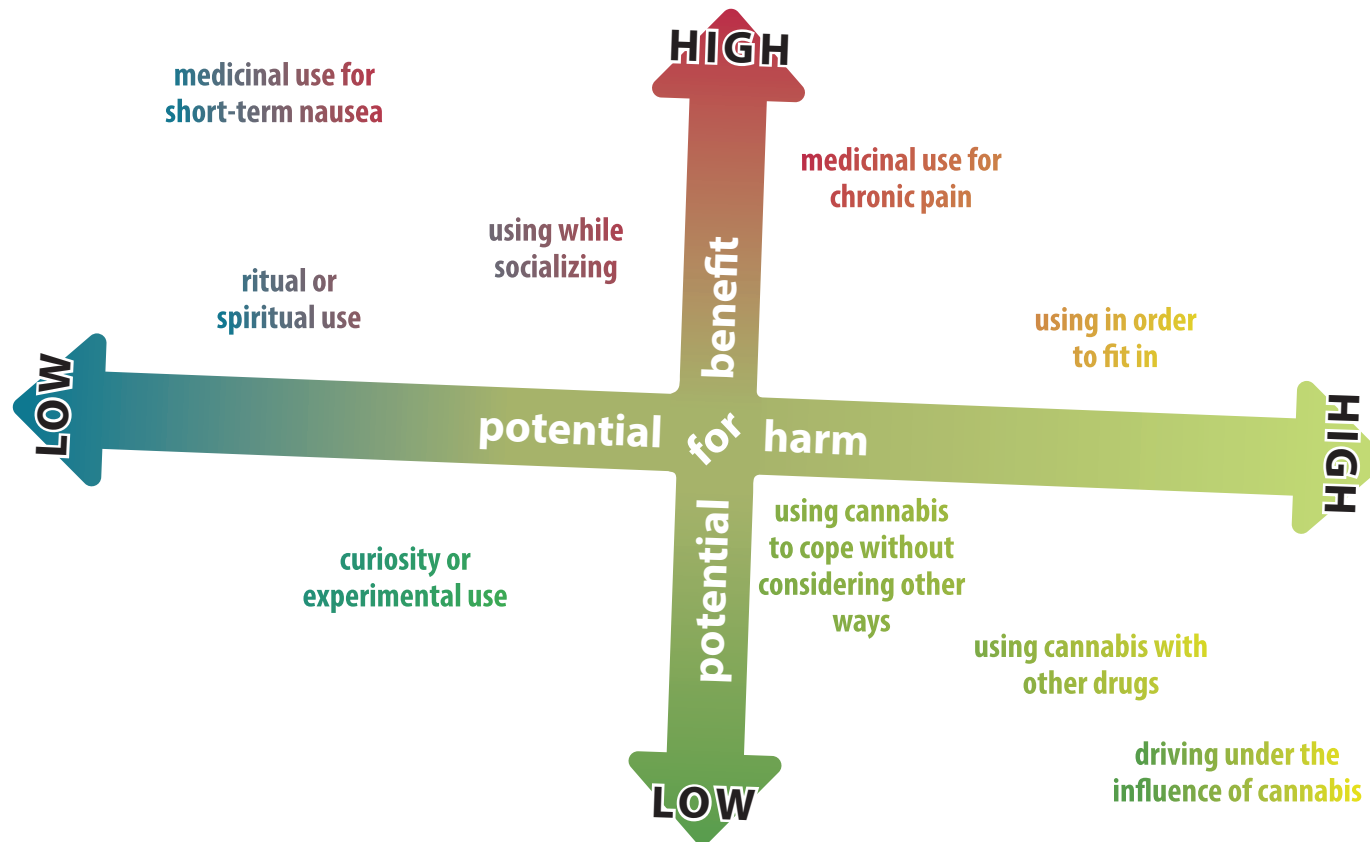
problems. But it may also be a safer alternative for people struggling with alcohol or opioid dependence. There are no reports of overdose deaths from cannabis use. Cannabis use may trigger schizophrenia in some people prone to the disorder. Some people with mental health problems feel cannabis helps them manage unpleasant symptoms.



Some people would like to hold a single narrative about cannabis. Some say it's a nightmare. Others insist it's a miracle drug. We need to recognize the broader picture. In real life, **the benefits and harms of any drug use are not opposites along a single continuum**. Their relationship is complex, as shown in the image below, especially when time is factored into the equation. Risk of long- or short-term harm is one factor (along with a person's health status, personal values, past experiences, and degree of social connectedness) in deciding whether or not to use a drug for its perceived benefits.

Like all sources of pain relief and pleasure – from food and sex to Netflix and online shopping – drug use offers benefits. But there are limits to what is reasonable. Most of us know what those limits are, even if we don't always abide by them. For various reasons, some of us have a harder time than others managing our consumption.

Combining cannabis use with activities that require unimpaired attention – driving, engaging in safety-sensitive work, and caring for young children – is a real threat and deserves attention. Addressing impaired driving, working



or caregiving is not the only way to promote safety. We also need to address the structures in our society that generate or promote excessive risk-taking in the first place. Our traditional risk orientation fails to address structures in our society, such as poverty, which may contribute to greater risk taking. For example, many parents cannot afford to put their children in organized programs that provide fun and meaning. Some of these children can turn to drugs like cannabis as an alternate way to explore, engage with peers or make sense of their world. Sometimes our responses can make things worse. Suspending students for cannabis use does not reform them. It disconnects them from the caring adults in their school. Without caring adults, young people are less able to manage risk.

Today we can talk more openly about cannabis use. **We have a chance to develop a better understanding of why some people use it, and how they can use it as safely as possible.** We have examples we can look to for insight and guidance. Colorado, Washington and Oregon are among nine US states that have legalized cannabis for non-medical purposes. To date there is no evidence of vastly increased use from legalization. People are not losing their jobs or shirking their family responsibilities. Students are not quitting school more than usual. Society did not collapse in those states and ours will not either.

For further information and support on cannabis policy:

- [Here to Help](#)
- [The Foundry](#)
- [Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre](#)

## Safer Cannabis Use

No matter what the rules and restrictions or community norms are, some people will use cannabis. Anyone choosing to use cannabis can be encouraged to think about the following questions and ways to reduce harm.



Before you use cannabis, ask yourself ...

- **Do I really want to use it?** Sometimes cannabis helps. Sometimes it makes things worse.
- **Can I trust my source?** Legal cannabis sources are tested for quality while street cannabis is not.
- **How much THC is in it?** THC or delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol is the most well-known cannabinoid. Too much THC can cause unwanted effects (e.g., psychosis, paranoia).
- **How much CBD is in it?** Cannabidiol or CBD is another cannabinoid. Unlike THC, CBD does not produce a high feeling or intoxication. There is some evidence that CBD may block or lower some of the effects of THC and may contribute to the health benefits associated with cannabis use.

It's safer to ...

- **Avoid using too much too often**, especially if you're young. Human brains are not fully developed until early adulthood. Regular use (daily or almost daily) over time can lead to dependence, as well as learning and memory problems. You may start needing it just to feel normal.
- **Wait at least six hours** before driving or operating machinery.
- **Avoid smoking.** Vaping and using edibles are better options because they are not as harmful to your lungs. If you do smoke, don't hold in the smoke. Most of the THC is absorbed in the first few seconds.
- **Go slowly** when eating or drinking cannabis; these modes take longer to deliver effects. Once those come, you can get higher than expected. Try a little and wait at least an hour before using more. Same advice when trying a new strain – go slowly.

... **Continued**

## Safer Cannabis Use (continued)

It's safer to ...

- **Avoid mixing substances.** Adding tobacco to a joint means adding cancer-causing toxins. Drinking alcohol while using cannabis intensifies the effects and makes them last longer than expected.
- **Skip cannabis** or seek medical advice if you have (or a member of your family has) a history of psychosis or a substance use disorder. Cannabis use can increase the risk that symptoms of these conditions will reappear or get worse. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it's safest to avoid using cannabis.
- **Avoid synthetic cannabinoids** (e.g., K2, Spice). Synthetics are often designed to copy the effects of THC. The content of many synthetic cannabis products is unknown. The effects can range from weak to very strong. Synthetic cannabis has been linked to seizures, irregular heartbeat, panic attacks, agitation, hallucinations and, in some cases, death.



For more information see:

- [The Blunt Truth](#)
- [Safer Cannabis Use](#)
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#)





## Going forward

While legalization has changed the status of cannabis among adults, cannabis use rates are not likely to increase very much in the short term. What will change is the way cannabis is positioned within society.

As a legal substance, cannabis will likely become more socially acceptable to the general public. Rates of cannabis use will presumably depend on the same factors as alcohol and tobacco use. These include price, product promotion, availability, perceived benefits, and the degree to which other options are available for achieving the same benefits. The legalization of cannabis means we must ensure communities have the tools to navigate a world where cannabis is available and promoted.

Cannabis legalization provides a variety of regulatory tools we can use to promote a balanced approach to cannabis. We can also use them to build individual and community capacity to

manage our well-being. What's more, legalization invites opportunity for open dialogue with various stakeholders in the community – adults, youth, new Canadians, Indigenous groups, various levels of government, community organizations and others.

Rather than focusing only on the dangers of cannabis (i.e., what might happen), communities can choose to build capacity and resilience in a range of stakeholders and groups in the community. This requires a focus on how we would like our living environments to be.

Today there is space to explore and reflect on how different drugs are regulated in our society. We can more comfortably and carefully consider the implications of different approaches to drug regulation, including prohibition and availability through a legal market. How do we as a society decide which approach to use for which drug? How do different approaches affect people who use drugs and their families? In these explorations, cannabis legalization becomes the beginning rather than the end of discussion. It provides multiple opportunities for community leaders, organizations and citizens to shape an inclusive and healthy community.

### Questions to explore:

- » What would a great community look and feel like?
- » How can our communities contribute to well-being among all citizens?

Notes:

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